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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 000503

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/25/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [HO](#)

SUBJECT: HONDURAN ARMED FORCES LEADERSHIP CRISIS

REF: A. TEGUCIGALPA 489

[1](#)B. CARACAS 791

[1](#)C. TEGUCIGALPA 495 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, reasons 1.4 (b & d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The political stir over President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya,s proposed opinion poll regarding a constituent assembly (Ref A) has precipitated an even more substantive crisis over the country,s military leadership. While the poll serves as a major political distraction, it is the question of how the armed forces (HOAF) will react in the event of any genuine constitutional or political leadership crisis that is of greatest concern to the Embassy. Rumors abound regarding possible Venezuelan military intervention, but none has been substantiated in any way; a Venezuelan military aircraft which landed in Tegucigalpa,s international airport on June 25 was in no way related to the crisis. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) President Zelaya dismissed Joint Defense Chief (CHOD) General Romeo Vasquez Velasquez June 24 when he declined the President,s order that the Honduran Armed Forces provide logistical support to carry out the scheduled June 28 poll (Ref C). In solidarity with the CHOD, Minister of Defense Edmundo Orellana and the three service commanders immediately resigned. At present, all service chiefs have remained in their offices, with the Air Force chief even handing over polling materials stored on his base to President Zelaya on June 25 (septel). The Constitutional Hall of the Supreme Court, in response to a petition by the Attorney General on June 25, promptly ruled the dismissal was illegal because it was based on the CHOD,s refusal to carry out an illegal act. The public reaction to the firing was virtually unanimously supportive for the military,s stance, leading to a large rally of several thousand people outside of the Headquarters of the Joint Chiefs on June 26. President Zelaya has not named any replacements for the military leadership. It is important to note the Vice CHOD, General Venacio Cervantes has been with Embassy DATT at an event in Brazil during the past two weeks, and therefore has not resigned his post.

[1](#)3. (U) In the midst of the events of June 25, Toncontin

International Airport in Tegucigalpa was briefly closed to allow a Venezuelan military aircraft to land. The flight was not/not related in any way to the military or political crisis, but rather was a previously-scheduled flight to drop off Honduran military cadets who had participated in a ceremonial event in Venezuela (Ref B). Nonetheless, the landing provoked substantial rumors.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador spoke with President Zelaya the evening of June 25 to express his concerns over both the political and the military leadership crises, and urged Zelaya to find a peaceful way out of both. The Ambassador encouraged Zelaya to reinstate the commanders now that the Supreme Court had ruled in their favor. Zelaya responded he would be willing to do so if he could be given some gesture of loyalty in order to save face. Zelaya suggested that act might be for the HOAF to serve as security for delivery of the materials, which he qualified as a legal act (Note: At present, Zelaya has tasked the Honduran National Police to provide security in lieu of the HOAF; no response has been heard yet from Minister of Security Jorge Rodas Gamero regarding this assignment, though he assured Poloff June 26 the police would defend the law and the Constitution. End note.) The Ambassador encouraged Zelaya to speak to Vasquez and passed the President,s message on to the latter. The Ambassador spoke again with Zelaya the morning of June 26, and Zelaya informed him he had received a call from Vasquez to discuss a possible way forward.

¶5. (C) If Zelaya and Vasquez are unable to find a way to restore the dismissed leadership, potential front-runners for CHOD appear to be VCHOD Cervantes, Air Force commander Prince (who may have gained stature in the President,s eyes for having handed over the polling materials to him despite

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officially being out of a job at the time), or a lower-ranking officer Zelaya deems more likely to serve without question. The most likely candidates in that case are believed to be the current commander of the Presidential Guard Colonel Carlos Edgardo Mejia Morillo or C2 commander Colonel Concepcion Flores Barahona.

¶6. (C) Comment: While the political stir over Zelaya,s "fourth urn" has continued to receive the greatest amount of public and press attention, we are equally concerned about the lack of formal military leadership. Our hope is that Zelaya either reappoints the original chiefs, who are all strongly supportive of the democratic and constitutional order, or adheres to the formal process of selection that ensures that the best and most professional are selected. Certainly, the concern is that Zelaya will reach deep in the ranks of the military, and in effect purge the military, to find personally loyal commanders who are not as committed to democracy and the constitution. Such a development is more likely to embolden Zelaya to move against the democratic order and in effect undermine our decades-long successful effort to create an independent, professional military committed to democratic rule.

¶7. (C) Comment continued: There are, however, some encouraging signs even if a speedy solution is not found. We believe the chiefs responded against the poll because of pressure from the bulk of the HOAF officer corps, which is heavily in favor of defending the constitutional order. This suggests it will be difficult for Zelaya to find military leadership willing to go against the Constitution. Furthermore, the officer corps might not carry out orders of a CHOD they see as unconstitutional or undeserving of the title (if, for example, a low-ranking colonel is chosen). End comment.

LLORENS